Things aren't what they used to be' because we are suffering from psychological biases, according to scientists.

Professor Nick Chater reveals in the first part of *The Human Zoo* on BBC Radio Four today that our belief things were better in the past is because of loss aversion and our 'rose-tinted' memory.

A poll of UK citizens conducted by YouGov for the programme found that 70 per cent feel the world is getting worse, with less than 10 per cent believing it is getting better. It also found that 55 per cent feel their own lives are getting worse, with only 11 per cent thinking their life is getting better.

Professor Chater, of Warwick Business School, said: "But can this really be right? After all, if we really think that things were better then we should imagine that if we can 'roll back time' we should see life as getting steadily better. But going back in time would lead us through, among other things, 9/11, global nuclear confrontation, two world wars, increases in infant mortality, shortening life expectancy, and the loss of all the technological inventions that have made our lives easier like washing machines, ovens, electricity and so on.

"The idea that everything is getting worse – declinism - is an old one. Even ancient Athens saw itself as having declined from a former, mythical golden age. So perhaps our minds are tricking us into thinking things are getting worse.

"In particular our memory tends to forget about the bad events in our past and we have a tendency to rehearse and dwell on the good things that happened in the past, we retell them a lot more often, so we reinforce the good memories. We tend to remember the great songs or cars or football players from the 'old days' and forget all the bad ones."

In an experiment that recorded people's anticipation of, actual experiences in, and subsequent recollection of meaningful life events - a trip to Europe, a Thanksgiving vacation, and a three-week bicycle trip in California – scientists found that people's recollection of the event was far more positive than their experience of it while doing it.

“The key point is that people rate past holidays - and other experiences - as much more positive in retrospect than they do at the time,” said Professor Chater. “This is an illustration of the general idea that my life now doesn’t seem as good as it will look in retrospect.”

Professor Chater also revealed that people’s judgement of the past is affected by loss aversion and the status quo bias.

“Loss aversion is when we tend to focus much more on losses instead of gains,” said Professor Chater, who is part of Warwick Business School's Behavioural Science Group and an adviser to the Government's Nudge Unit. “So losing £10 is much more negative than gaining £10 is positive. As our lives progress, while some things change for the better and some change for the worse, loss aversion means that we pay much more attention to the bad things. So overall, we think life is getting worse.

“This leads to status quo bias, which asserts that whatever the situation is now, things in the future will get worse.

“This plus loss aversion, combined with our memory’s tendency to filter out bad experiences from the past, can leave us seeing the world, and our lives, as getting worse.”

So the good news, if you think things are getting worse, is that you may be suffering from the psychology of declinism, rather than actual decline.